

Message Text

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E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PFOR, LE, IS

SUBJECT: ISRAEL AND LEBANON

REFS: (A) TEL AVIV 4873 (NOTAL), (B) TEL AVIV 4953 (NOTAL)

BEGIN SUMMARY: THE POST-ENTEBBE MOOD OF SELF-CONFIDENCE HAS REINFORCED THE OPINION HERE THAT ISRAEL'S DECISION NOT TO INTERVENE MILITARILY IN LEBANON HAS BEEN CORRECT. ISRAELIS SEE LEBANON AS AN ILLUSTRATION OF THE DISUNITY IN THE ARAB WORLD; THAT DISUNITY WAS ALSO EVIDENT IN THE RECENT ASAD AND SADAT SPEECHES. ISRAELI LEADERS HAVE LITTLE IDEA OF HOW LEBANON WILL DEVELOP; THEY REMAIN CONCERNED BUT NOT UNDULY WORRIED. END SUMMARY.

1. THE FEELING OF CONFIDENCE STEMMING FROM THE ENTEBBE RESCUE OPERATION HAS HAD AN EFFECT ON ISRAELI PERCEPTIONS OF THE CONTINUING WAR IN LEBANON AND THE CONSEQUENCES IT MAY HAVE FOR THEIR COUNTRY. THERE IS WIDER ACCEPTANCE NOW OF THE
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VIEW THAT ISRAEL HAS NOT TAKEN ACTION IN LEBANON BECAUSE OF

A CONSCIOUS POLICY DECISION RATHER THAN BECAUSE IT DID NOT KNOW WHAT TO DO OR WAS UNABLE TO ACT. ISRAELIS BELIEVE THIS VIEW IS SHARED BY THEIR NEIGHBORS. MFA DIRECTOR GENERAL AVINERI POINTED OUT TO THE CHARGE' JULY 25 THAT ENTEBBE HAS ENABLED ISRAEL TO CONTINUE TO PURSUE ITS MODERATE COURSE IN LEBANON BECAUSE NOW NO ONE DOUBTS ISRAEL'S ABILITY TO ACT OR ITS WILLINGNESS TO DO SO WHEN ITS INTERESTS ARE DIRECTLY AFFECTED.

2. ISRAELI LEADERS ARE GENERALLY SATISFIED THAT THEIR POLICY OF RESTRAINT IN LEBANON HAS BEEN CORRECT. THEY ARE CONCERNED BUT NOT UNDULY WORRIED, AT LEAST AT PRESENT, ABOUT THE FUTURE COURSE OF EVENTS AND PARTICULARLY ABOUT THE REACTION OF OTHER ARAB GOVERNMENTS TO SYRIAN EFFORTS TO IMPOSE A SETTLEMENT IN LEBANON. THEY CONTINUE TO FAVOR THE PRESENT COALESCENCE OF CHRISTIAN AND SYRIAN EFFORTS, BUT BELIEVE THAT NEITHER AN ALL-OUT CHRISTIAN VICTORY NOR A SYRIAN TAKEOVER WOULD BE IN ISRAEL'S LONG RUN INTERESTS.

3. AS WE HAVE PREVIOUSLY REPORTED, ISRAELI RESTRAINT HAS BEEN GOVERNED IN LARGE PART BY A DESIRE NOT TO INTERFERE WITH WHAT IS PERCEIVED TO BE VITAL DAMAGE TO THE PLO. RABIN REPEATED THIS THEME LAST WEEK WHEN HE SAID PUBLICLY THAT SYRIA IS IN LEBANON TO PREVENT A TAKEOVER BY THE LEFTISTS AND THE PLO, AND THIS IS NO REASON FOR WAR BETWEEN ISRAEL AND SYRIA. HOWEVER, THERE IS CONTINUING CONCERN (FANNED BY COOPERATION DURING THE EVACUATIONS) ABOUT THE POSSIBILITY THAT THE UNITED STATES MIGHT DIGNIFY THE PLO BY SOME MEANS OF RECOGNITION EVEN AT THIS TIME WHEN THAT ORGANIZATION IS FIGHTING FOR ITS EXISTENCE.

4. IN ADDITION, ISRAEL'S LEADERS AND POLITICAL OBSERVERS NOTE WITH GROWING CONCERN WHAT THEY CONSIDER TO BE "CREEPING ANNEXATION" OF PORTIONS OF LEBANON BY SYRIA. WHILE THEY DO NOT WANT TO SEE A LEBANON WHICH HAS BEEN ANNEXED TO SYRIA, THEY REALIZE THAT MUCH OF THE BEKAA VALLEY IS NOW UNDER DE FACTO SYRIAN CONTROL. THIS TREND TOWARD ANNEXATION- PARTICULARLY WHEN IT INVOLVES A PORTION OF LEBANON CLOSE TO ISRAEL - RAISES QUESTIONS ABOUT THE FUTURE AND MAY REAWAKEN THE FEAR, SO WIDELY EXPRESSED LAST YEAR, OF A NEW CON-
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FRONTATION BORDER TO THE NORTH.

5. AT THE SAME TIME, THE CONCEPT OF AN OPEN BORDER WITH SOUTHERN LEBANON IS BECOMING A POSSIBILITY. WHAT BEGAN AS LIMITED MEDICAL ASSISTANCE TO REFUGEES HAS NOW DEVELOPED INTO A CAREFULLY CONTROLLED EXCHANGE OF GOODS WITH BORDER VILLAGES. PERES SAID LAST WEEK THAT THIS MAY BE THE START OF AN ERA OF OPEN BRIDGES BETWEEN THE TWO COUNTRIES. AVINERI

TOLD US THAT THIS "HUMANITARIAN" POLICY IS GAINING A LIFE OF ITS OWN AND MAY HAVE CONSEQUENCES WHICH ARE NOT NOW FORESEEABLE. THIS TENDS TO CONFIRM WHAT WE HAD BELIEVED TO BE THE CASE - THAT THE GOI HAS NO FIRM OPEN BORDER POLICY TOWARD LEBANON BUT IS WILLING TO LET THIS DEVELOP AS A MEANS OF ILLUSTRATING ITS REASONABLENESS TOWARD ITS NEIGHBORS.

6. ISRAELI OFFICIALS HAVE BEEN CLOSELY EXAMINING LAST WEEK'S SPEECHES BY PRESIDENTS ASAD AND SADAT BUT PROFESS TO FIND NOTHING WHICH CALLS FOR ANY CHANGE IN ISRAEL'S POLICIES. THEY SEE THE SPEECHES AS BEING DIRECTED PRIMARILY AT EACH OTHER, WITH SOME OBLIGATORY UNFAVORABLE COMMENTS ABOUT ISRAEL BUT WITH NO CLEAR SIGNALS. THE DEPUTY DIRECTOR OF THE MFA RESEARCH DIVISION TOLD US THAT THE EFFECT OF THE TWO SPEECHES HAS BEEN TO BRING EGYPT AND SYRIA BACK TO WHERE THEY WERE IN PRE-RIYADH DAYS. HE MAINTAINED THAT THE IMPLICATIONS FOR ISRAEL ARE SIMPLY NOT CLEAR AND THAT ISRAEL MUST WAIT AND SEE HOW RELATIONS BETWEEN THESE TWO ARAB STATES DEVELOP. A REPORT ON THE TWO SPEECHES WAS CONSIDERED BY THE CABINET AT ITS WEEKLY MEETING ON JULY 25 BUT NO DECISION OR STATEMENT WAS ANNOUNCED. RESTRAINT MAY ALSO BE CONSIDERED THE WISEST POLICY IN THE POLEMICAL FIELD, WHERE ISRAEL IS CONTENT TO LET ASAD AND SADAT TRY TO SQUARE THEIR OPPOSING POSITIONS FOR THEIR ARAB BROTHERS.

7. OBSERVERS HERE CONTINUE TO BELIEVE THAT EGYPT IS LIMITED IN THE DIRECT ACTION IT CAN UNDERTAKE IN LEBANON. ON THE OTHER HAND, EGYPT IS PREPARED TO TAKE ACTION IN OTHER AREAS; CAREFUL NOTE IS BEING MADE OF THE FACT THAT EGYPT HAS TURNED ITS ATTENTION TO ITS BORDER WITH LIBYA AND TO CLOSER RELATIONS WITH SUDAN, WITH THE SITUATION IN THE SINAI REMAINING CALM. THE NEW TIES BETWEEN EGYPT AND SUDAN AND, CONFIDENTIAL

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TO A LESSER EXTENT, SAUDI ARABIA ARE SEEN TO BE THE RESULT OF AN AFFINITY OF INTERESTS BETWEEN CONSERVATIVE ARAB STATES WHICH MAY NOT LAST VERY LONG. ISRAEL'S ARAB WATCHERS REMAIN CONCERNED ABOUT IRAQ, WHOSE CHIEF GOAL THEY SAY IS THE OVERTHROW OF ASAD. THEY BELIEVE THAT THIS IS ANOTHER ILLUSTRATION OF THE CONTINUING DISUNITY IN THE ARAB WORLD AND THAT THE RECENT MARATHON SPEECHES BY THE TWO PRESIDENTS HAVE DONE LITTLE OR NOTHING TO OVERCOME THAT DISUNITY.

8. IN SUM, ISRAELIS ARE ENJOYING WHAT COULD ALMOST BE CALLED A "SUMMER OF CONTENT" WHILE A SHOOTING WAR AND A VERBAL CONFLICT CONTINUE AROUND THEM. THE ENTEBBE OPERATION, WITH ITS SHOT-IN-THE-ARM EFFECT, HAS PROVIDED A DIFFERENT BACKGROUND AGAINST WHICH ANY POTENTIAL ISRAELI ACTION REGARDING LEBANON HAS TO BE CONSIDERED. IT HAS LED TO AN AIR OF QUIET CON-

FIDENCE, ALTHOUGH NOT SMUGNESS - THE "SPIRIT OF ENTEBBE" MAY HAVE PUT AN END TO THE PSYCHOLOGICAL DOWNTREND RESULTING FROM THE YOM KIPPUR WAR BUT IT DID NOT ERASE THAT WAR FROM MEMORY. IN COMMON WITH MANY OTHERS, ISRAELI LEADERS ARE AT A LOSS AS TO THE LIKELY OR EVEN THE DESIRED END RESULT IN LEBANON, AND CAN ONLY CONTINUE TO WATCH THE SITUATION CAREFULLY AND TO BE PREPARED TO TAKE ACTION IF THEY DETERMINE IT TO BE NECESSARY. THE SITUATION THERE HAS CHANGED RADICALLY IN THE LAST FEW MONTHS TO THEIR ADVANTAGE AND THEY MUST TAKE INTO ACCOUNT THAT IT COULD CHANGE AGAIN. IN THE FINAL ANALYSIS ISRAEL'S ATTITUDE TOWARD DEVELOPMENTS IN LEBANON WILL CONTINUE TO BE DETERMINED BY THE RISK THOSE DEVELOPMENTS ARE PERCEIVED TO PRESENT FOR ISRAEL'S SECURITY.
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